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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA; TREASURY FOR  
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TAGS: [SENV](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [BM](#) [NGO](#)

SUBJECT: VILLAGERS REVIVE THE IRRAWADDY DELTA'S FOREST

1. (U) Summary: A Burmese domestic NGO, the Forest Resource and Environment Development and Conservation Association (FREDA), uses village-based programs to slow rampant deforestation in the southern part of Irrawaddy division. Residents have cut down 86% of the forest cover for firewood, building materials, rice fields and prawn farms. Utilizing foreign donor resources and careful coordination with government officials, FREDA offers villagers a better natural environment, new income generation opportunities, improvements in village conditions, and experiences at self-governance. In return, they assist locals to take responsibility to replant and maintain the new forests. The Irrawaddy delta is an area of deep poverty largely ignored by the government, but FREDA shows how an independent NGO can have a broad impact at the local level and help build democracy from the ground up. End Summary.

It Takes the Villagers

2. (U) Located at the delta of one of Southeast Asia's longest rivers, central and western Irrawaddy Division produces some of the highest quality rice in Burma. Its inhabitants, however, have cut down 86% of the division's forests to add new rice paddies and prawn farms, and to collect firewood and building materials. The southern delta section of the Division, however, is an unproductive 4,000 sq. mi. flood plain criss-crossed by water channels that carve land into parcels too small to farm profitably. Villagers here are extremely poor and survive by selling roofing woven from palm leaves and catching fish and crabs from river channels. The government does not supply most villages with any services, including fresh water or basic education.

3. (U) The Forest Resource and Environment Development and Conservation Association (FREDA) is a leading Burmese independent NGO. Since 1999, FREDA has supported a growing network of villages in the delta region committed to reforestation. The GOB allows FREDA to operate independently, as long as FREDA keeps officials informed about its projects. The General Secretary of FREDA hosted embassy reps on a recent four-day visit (spent mostly in boats) to some of FREDA's 18 project villages, including Byone Hmwe, Oak-Po, Wakon and Te Pin Seik.

4. (U) To find candidate communities, FREDA educates villagers about the importance of mangroves for marine life and erosion control, and then obtains a commitment from village residents to stop cutting the forest and to start planting and protecting trees instead. FREDA provides participants with training, protective clothing, tools, rice, and a minimal per diem to plant new trees in cleared areas and to clear away brush choking existing natural growth. Villagers plant mangrove varieties, important to mitigate erosion and support local marine life, as well as other species to avoid monoculture problems. The villagers must care for their assigned plot of land, usually one half to two acres in size, and protect it from encroachment and intrusion. Some villagers also tend seedling nurseries that supply the areas to be reforested, while others oversee the efforts of a number of villages. After two to three years, villagers can sustainably harvest the trees for building materials and for crating material to ship crabs to market. After at least five years, they can cut the trees selectively for raw lumber.

5. (U) German and Japanese NGOs provide the majority of FREDA's funding, at \$8,000-\$10,000 per village. With additional funding, FREDA supports village improvement, including upgrading school buildings and digging wells to supply clean water. As residents see the forest returning and new economic opportunities created, more families join the efforts. Some even move from other areas in Irrawaddy Division into FREDA-sponsored villages. Te Pin Seik, a model village, started with only 15 participating families, and now has over 70. As evidence of the program's success, 28 of the families contribute to the \$13 monthly salary for a private teacher to educate the 170 primary and middle school children living in the village.

16. (U) Although conspicuously marked, FREDA project areas do not need signs: the difference in forest cover, tree health and diversity is obvious. Locals say that even the native deer are dissuaded by other animals from trespassing on the strictly protected FREDA sites. FREDA's Secretary General plans to slowly introduce small crab and prawn farms into the new mangrove areas to determine whether the mangroves can filter the water well enough to make these small-scale activities profitable without the serious environmental contamination caused by larger ponds.

Not Yet Clean and Green

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17. (SBU) FREDA's villagers enjoy a better life than many of their neighbors, but they still face difficulties. It takes two to three years before they can begin to harvest building materials, including poles and small panels for packing crates, and five to ten years before the trees are big enough to produce more profitable lumber. Some other villages in the division that enjoy close contacts with local SPDC authorities build unregulated fish and prawn farms close to FREDA land. The contaminated water and soil encroaches into the nearby-by land and can kill new tree growth. Local Forestry Ministry officials, accustomed to getting kickbacks from illegal timber sales to supplement their meager GOB salaries, also pressure the villagers to continue payments.

18. (SBU) Many ethnic Karen live in the delta region, and the military has tried to suppress Karen "insurgents" in the region in the past. The GOB considers southern Irrawaddy division a "brown" area, i.e., not fully secured, where resistance groups are still present. Authorities watch Karen individuals closely, including FREDA participants, and report on all of their activities. Embassy participants felt GOB presence everywhere on the trip, from the bureaucratic paperwork required for visit authorization, to the police officer who accompanied the entire four-day tour. The British Ambassador was among the delegation, but did not visit the projects as planned because the GOB would not allow her tourist guests into the project areas.

19. (SBU) Comment: Even with these problems, the FREDA program offers a good example of how a domestic NGO can successfully benefit Burma's poor, develop communities, and protect natural resources while working around the government. Villagers have voluntarily come together to take responsibility for their environment and to make decisions to improve their villages' development. This, in turn, builds confidence and develops villagers' leadership and management skills to take greater control over their own futures. Supporting these efforts thereby diminishes regime control and builds the foundation for democracy. End comment.  
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